

# **Garlic and a whole lot of lovin'**

A love letter to Casey from Quishile Charan

We congregate in the semi-early mornings in the kitchen. Casey and I have shared many years in this house but recently she's been absent, living abroad. Finally she is home again. We've managed to fill the distance that living in another country can form with WhatsApp audio messages. Our times are backwards—19 hours apart. I wake up to Casey's afternoon, and my early-morning bus trips are filled with her voice. As our relationship has grown and changed the one constant has been food. We obsessively talk about khana—food: recipes to exchange, ways of cooking, memes about food, how khana affects our bodies, and (my personal favourite) bowel movements (I sincerely apologise to my friends but as you all know, I have sneaky ways of bringing up bowel movements in everyday conversation). This shared love of food and related matter has made our relationship stronger over the years. We share our cultural practices with each other—Casey's Judaism and my Hinduism—and find overlap in how we communicate and show love: through the things we eat and feed each other.

Recipe: Add 2 cloves of garlic.

Me. A wise woman:



A very wise meme

Casey explains “garlic eaters” to me and how a smell became a racial indicator and an anti-Semitic trope. It feels odd looking at Casey as she explains her ancestors’ history with garlic—persecution by smell—as I have shared histories with the plant. For me growing up, the smell that has been my racial indicator—the cue for racial mockery and slurs—is of spices, or rather the combination of things that make curry.

I would like to quickly interject here and state that using “you stinky Indian” or “curry bitch” is just lazy. All forms of khana and curry cooked in spices are delicious. I would gladly be a smelly bitch for the rest of my life, and let the smell ooze from my pores until my enemies can no longer breathe.

Recently my partner got sick. He couldn't breathe properly and we spent the night in A & E. It turns out it was a severe chest infection. When we got back to the house the next day Casey was excited to make the garlic cha—tea—she had been talking about. Cloves sat on the kitchen bench, our palms crushing down until the smells (and the good health that accompanies the smells) were realised. I sat in bed that night looking at my hands. They smelled like garlic—the aroma had settled into my skin. I kept thinking back to the Spanish Inquisition; where the Spaniards saw evil in garlic, I saw my love for Casey—or rather, smelled my love for Casey in my garlicky palms.

I would douse my body in garlic as a gesture of love to Casey, kinda like Lloyd Dobler in “Say Anything”, but instead of a boombox to declare love I’d be holding an excessive amount of garlic (Casey, this may or may not happen and I may or may not make it to your apartment in Chicago; more importantly we need to discuss if your apartment has a window and if I would be visible from your floor if I were holding an excessive amount of garlic).



Please imagine this is Quishile with an excessive amount of garlic instead of a boombox. If anyone is concerned about how Quishile would get Casey's attention while standing underneath her Chicago apartment, instead of playing music Quishile will throw garlic cloves. It has also come to Quishile's attention that Casey's Chicago apartment does not have a nice grassy lawn for her to stand on but she will work with what she's got.

Casey's default mode for discussing her histories has always been through humour, but jokes aside the labour of craft is continually enacted within her work.

It has been eight months: eight months of gradation-dying fabric in long swathes, cutting the swathes into squares, sewing the layers together, embroidering clove after clove. This is the first time Casey has made a quilt embroidered and to this scale. My early memories of living with Casey are of her crocheting wool blankets; one hook created woollen loops of memories towards a future whole.

Laid out on the gallery floor is a grid that reminds me of when the clouds part and all I can see are clear blue skies. Embroidered cloves are scattered across the surface like I am ascending into a garlicky heaven. For months I have heard about this quilt in audio messages, through phone calls and photos, but my first time seeing it, finished and laid out, was an emotional moment.

Blankets have been a tradition within my own family, made to mark a significant moment in someone's life and to express love. Standing by Casey's quilt, seeing the embroidery threads delicately woven together I could feel the love and dedication she has poured into the making of it. It's much more than love stitched into a blanket; it's knowing and needing to hold onto a history for yourself, to assert the agency to write your own history when so many have taken that from you.

The labour is undertaken for Casey, her family, her community: to show them their love has stood strong through many centuries. Even though garlic has also been used against her community, there is a space to reclaim these garlicky histories, glorious aroma and all. Garlic can fill hungry bellies but garlic can also fill the heart and cure what's been broken over time.



WhatsApp image from Casey to Quishile of the quilt in the making.

This quilt has taken almost a year of Casey's life. I strongly believe that craft encapsulates a time of its own, and to make slow is a very special thing. You can never move faster than your threads; they always remind you of the necessary pace. Here, in this go-slow labour, Casey has sat for extended periods of time with these stories of persecution, of what her ancestors lost, yet she has held onto love and it radiates throughout the space. A blanket is traditionally used for warmth, protection and comfort; here Casey has stitched these purposes together towards new futures and new histories.

It is nearing the time where Casey and I will have to say goodbye again; she will return soon to Chicago and my living room will be vacant once more, but her garlicky essence will remain. I don't think I will ever look at garlic the same way again.

To paraphrase Casey, to miss someone is bittersweet; there is the sadness of saying goodbye but there is the joy of knowing you have someone to miss. Someone to share a life with. Just as Casey's ancestors ate garlic to keep their bellies full, Casey's friendship has kept my stomach overflowing. As sad as this departure may be, it is a beautiful thing to have witnessed Casey's growth in her ancestral knowledge and craft; to have witnessed the fabric coming off the embroidery hoop, each clove carefully stitched; to see each piece come together; to watch clay moulded and fired and laid to the east. That type of love and dedication to her dead, to her ancestors, is the same love I have been fortunate to experience during our friendship.

Just like Casey's quilt, with its many patches stitched together to make a whole, Casey and I have stitched a life together. Baby blues to deep purples, Casey has stitched a place of rest for ancestors gone and ancestors to come: a reminder to find and hold onto love amongst histories that hold much violence; a reminder that tenderness is important and how we enact and communicate tenderness is even more important. This last month with Casey has been a tender moment amongst a turbulent year of addressing colonial and inherited trauma. To hold each other close and to navigate ways of caring, it's just a whole lot of garlicky lovin'.



Casey and Quishile's first image together. Years of friendships and we finally made it.